

*A Long Way Gone* by Ishmael Beah

*A Long Way Gone* is a devastating story of a boy who was swept into the Sierra Leone army at the young age of twelve. When the rebels attacked his town of Mattru Jong, Ishmael and several of his friends narrowly escaped the brutal death. They traveled for weeks, stopping at villages along the way for food and a place to stay, despite the villagers' suspicion that they are rebels in disguise. Eventually, they came to a town occupied by the Sierra Leone army, a seemingly great place to stay to be protected from the rebels who killed the boys' families. After a few weeks there, rumors surfaced of an imminent rebel attack. A lieutenant spoke to the town, saying that they were unprepared for the attack and needed every able-bodied boy or man to take arms or the town and everyone in it would be burned to the ground. The runaway boys were trained to mercilessly shoot the rebels along with dozens of other young boys with promises of avenging their families' death. They stayed with the army for years after the initial emergency, doing drugs and ruthlessly killing civilians and rebels alike. They learned to enjoy killing and felt no remorse in killing innocent civilians in the most horrific ways. They were finally saved by UNICEF workers and sent to a rehabilitation center, Ismael's salvation. There, Ismael learned to move past his violent childhood and was later reconnected with his uncle. After Ismael was rehabilitated, UNICEF sent him to New York to speak at a conference on behalf of the millions of army boys in the Sierra Leone civil war. Shortly after returning, the army forced occupation on his village. The violence escalated and Ismael decided to escape Sierra Leone to avoid returning to the army. It took two nighttime bus rides, passing through several checkpoints where money-hungry soldiers took passengers' money for passage, and several miracles to get through the border and into the Guinea capital. Nevertheless, Ismael beat the odds and flew back to New York to live his new life with a woman he met at the conference.

This book was so empowering. When someone can move past such a gruesome and terrible "childhood", it shows the incredible resiliency of the human race. Throughout the book there were flashbacks to Ismael's pre-war childhood where he gave a great depiction of what's important to his culture and how village life functions. On a sadder note, it was a hard book to read when he told of what they would do to people with minimal sympathy in his voice. *A Long Way Gone* is beyond honest and is an amazing account of what it's like to be an African boy soldier.